

State auditors investigate missing Cape Henlopen High School account funds

By Georgia Leonhart Cape Gazette staff

After staging what many people called the best prom in years, Cape Henlopen High School teacher and junior class adviser Marissa DiSanto said she is heart-broken at missing the Cape Henlopen High School graduation ceremony Tuesday, June 5. She was not allowed to attend because she was suspended with pay five days earlier, based on allegations that some junior class activities fund monies are missing.

"I don't know who said money is missing and I don't know how much money they claim is missing," DiSanto said. She added while she was being questioned Thursday, June 7, state administrative auditor Karen Wallace and her assistant suggested the amount could be between \$ 500 and \$ 2,500.

"The auditors also said they thought I had been working from a management guide for handling student activities funds. I've never seen the guide," DiSanto said, adding she asked seven other student advisers about the guide, including some who have been at the high school for as long as 20 years. "None of them said they ever saw a guide," DiSanto said.

Principal John Yore said he wants to protect high school staff and student accounts. He is planning a full finance training session for all staff to avoid practices that may leave teachers without necessary information and instruction regarding proper account management. The training session will be held before the school year begins.

Wallace met with Cape Henlopen School District Director of Business Operations Edward Seibert Wednesday, May 30, in response to what he described as indicators of a problem. Seibert said he believed the auditor's office would be returning the following day to conduct its investigation.

Pending the result of the auditor's investigation and based upon the available evidence, Superintendent George Stone made the decision and suspended DiSanto Thursday, May 31.

However, state auditors did not return to Cape May 31. Despite efforts of Principal John Yore to have the investigation concluded and the matter resolved as quickly as possible, state auditors did not conduct on-site questioning of DiSanto and other witnesses until Thursday, June 7.

"The amount of time it takes for an investigation like this varies, but it is the position of the auditor's office that we will leave no stone unturned," said Nick Adams, executive assistant to the state auditor. "We have a 100 per-cent conviction rate for every case our office has forwarded for criminal prosecution, and that is attributable to the thoroughness with which our investigations are conducted," he said. The investigation was still active Monday, June 18. Adams said he does not know when it will be concluded.

A week after her June 7 meeting with the auditors, DiSanto said she still doesn't know what is going on. "I'm not sure what they're looking for. I managed the money as best I could with the information I was given," DiSanto said.

DiSanto said she has been as cooperative as possible with the district office, and she is confident everything will be favorably resolved. She has received the support of the Cape Henlopen Education Association and was accompanied by its representative John Dean for a May 31 meeting with Stone and Delaware State Education Association UniServ Director Charlie Schaeffer for the June 7 meeting with the auditors.

District officials and administrators said they are unable to comment regarding a personnel matter under active investigation.

Seibert said that when indicators of a problem were discovered, the district office did the prudent thing by calling the state auditor's office. "It is a routine matter, an isolated and limited incident involving one school and one account," Seibert said.

Stone said he has been regularly calling the auditor's office and asking them to wrap it up. "The delay is not fair to anyone," he said.

A teacher at the high school for two years, DiSanto said she organized fundraisers and worked with more than 50 students at wrestling matches, basketball games and concession stands throughout the year to raise approximately \$ 8,000 to fund the prom. "We spent approximately \$ 8,000 for the prom, and I had people tell me it was the best prom they had seen in years," DiSanto said.

Prom ticket sales raised an additional \$ 9,000 that will go toward the class of 2008 graduation ceremonies and gift to the school, DiSanto said, adding that no one asked any questions about the money all year long.

"I worked so hard for the kids," DiSanto said.

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